

Volunteers in Police Service (VIPS)
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Ten years ago, the Garland Police Department in Garland, Texas, (a suburb of Dallas with a population of over 220,000) began exploring the idea of using citizen volunteers within the department. With increases in calls for service, the department looked at ways to put officers back on the street and offer them support for their clerical and non-police duties.

The volunteer program started with a part-time civilian coordinator and 5 citizen volunteers. At first, the volunteers filed documents and answered the phone. Soon, officers and command staff were brainstorming on how volunteers could assist their units. Patrol began the Vacation Watch program. This program offers citizens an opportunity to assist police by patrolling homes while the owners are out of town. The front desk started using volunteers to assist citizens needing fingerprints for employment, adoption and other non-criminal reasons. Criminal Investigations recruited volunteers to help with the Pawn Shop detail comparing reported stolen property to pawn tickets. The traffic unit began using volunteers to conduct speed surveys. Volunteers were utilized to assist with community outreach and special events as well. Soon, they had volunteers in almost every division of their department and a full-time coordinator. Currently over 160 citizens give of their time and skill to offer a helping hand to the officers and detectives of Garland. This is in addition to the 120 citizens who are active in Neighborhood Crime watch patrols and 12 volunteer coaches active in our police youth boxing league. In November of 2003, the department will move into a brand new, 100,000 square foot police station where space has been added for volunteers throughout the building. At that time, the department is expected to expand the volunteer program even more.

In 1997, the Garland Police Department experienced support from its volunteers like never before. When a patrol officer, Michael David Moore was killed in the line of duty during an attempted bank robbery, the volunteers went above and beyond the call of duty. They assisted with the candlelight vigil which was held at the bank the following night. They cut ribbons, arranged parking cones, directed traffic and assisted with the family. Volunteers answered the department telephones, so the entire staff could attend the funeral service. Because this officer was born and raised in another state, the department would conduct

funerals in two different states and a graveside service in a third. The volunteers wanted to show their support for the department in a special way. Since the slain officer's body would be traveling by plane to his home state, there would be no local graveside service. The volunteers decided that after the funeral procession made its way to the funeral home, the police personnel and all visiting officers would be served a meal. A team of 10 volunteers contacted their churches and local civic groups asking for "pot-luck" donations of food and paper products. No one was sure if there would be enough food. The time of the service drew near and cars began stopping at the door of the church gymnasium where the food would be served. Boy scout and girl scout troops dropped off food. Church groups, families, business owners and many others brought in even more. Even the local crossing guards sent someone with baked goods. After the service, over 1,000 sworn officers from across the state and across the country were served. This gave all sworn personnel a chance to visit with each other and feel the support from their community and fellow officers. There was so much food left over, two local homeless shelters were given enough food to feed their clients for two days. The impact of that selfless act by the volunteers proved to everyone that they are truly a part of the "police family". Volunteers now assist staff with the distribution of officer packets offering information on line-of-duty benefits and updating information on each officer's funeral wishes. This activity is conducted each May 15th, National Police Memorial Day.

In order for a volunteer program to be successful, certain items have to be in place. First, a chain of command must be established. It is important that whoever is responsible for the program, whether they are sworn or civilian, has the support he/she needs from command staff. Upper level police management must understand how the program works and how it will be utilized by the sworn and civilian personnel. All personnel who will work with volunteers should receive adequate training on the use of volunteers. They must understand that the volunteers are there to assist them with their service to the community, not to replace them.

Secondly, a budget must be established. Although volunteers contribute a great deal of time to the department, there are costs involved. The Garland Police Department relies on financial support from the community as well as money from the police budget. Uniforms, supplies, equipment, training and

recognition are all important components of a successful program. The Justice Department has recently offered grant money to law enforcement volunteer programs. Large corporations and local businesses can also be a source of funding.

It is widely recommended that anyone within a law enforcement agency who will coordinate volunteers receive proper training. This person should have strong communication skills and be able to handle a wide variety of tasks within your department. A general knowledge of volunteer management will make a big difference in your program. Your department may choose to hire a civilian coordinator or train a sworn member of your department to do the job. Either way, consistency and excellent people skills will assure the programs success. Your local Volunteer Center will offer training and support for minimal cost. There are also organizations offering conferences and training regarding volunteer management. Some of these include the National Points of Light Foundation, the Association of Volunteer Administrators, National Association of Volunteer Programs in Local Government and your State offices of Community Service. In addition, identify someone who already has a successful program and ask him or her to mentor your coordinator. You might also consider utilizing their skills and expertise to assist you in getting a new program off the ground.

A clear and concise set of rules and regulations should be written in order to guide the volunteers on what they can and cannot do. Addressing issues in writing such as confidentiality, attire, responsibilities, safety, chain of command, absences and break schedules will help the program run smoothly. Include these items in your departmental policies and procedures.

Thorough application, interview and screening processes will help your program maintain a high level of integrity. Not everyone who applies will be appropriate for volunteering in your agency. Some agencies even require their volunteers to submit to a polygraph exam and drug testing. It is important that you establish the minimum requirements for acceptance into your particular program. Some departments require their volunteers to attend a Citizen's Police Academy or other orientation program. Many smaller departments conduct their training of volunteers on an individual basis. It is always recommended that a probationary period be established so both volunteer and police supervisor are happy with the placement.

Lastly, recognizing volunteers for the contributions they make is an important part of program management. Since these citizens receive no monetary compensation, they must receive their “volunteer paycheck” in the form of staff members who are appreciative. Some departments host a banquet or other celebration allowing the staff to show their gratitude. Some of the most successful events involve the staff serving food to the volunteers or handing out awards. Sending information about your volunteers to the local media is another way to thank them.

Using citizen volunteers in law enforcement has augmented service to citizens in many cities and counties. Each program is different, but successful programs utilize basic volunteer management practices and continually evaluate and adjust their program to meet the needs of the staff, volunteers and community.